Imagining Nation, Imagining Queerness
in Contemporary South Korean Films

Honors Research Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for graduation "with Honors Research Distinction in Comparative Studies" in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

by
Juwon Lee

The Ohio State University
May 2012

Project Advisor
Professor Martin Joseph Ponce, Department of English
Professor Jian Chen, Department of English

INDEX

Introduction

At the beginning of 2006, the South Korean public was filled with conversations about the film *The King and the Clown 왕의 남자* (2005). The film's popularity skyrocketed as soon as it was released, and eventually a quarter of the total population of South Korea went to movie theaters to watch the film. Numerous TV programs used *The King and the Clown* references in their shows, and media coverage for the film did not stop for months. Witnessing this national upsurge about a film with a queer theme in South Korea, I was excited and appalled by this abrupt change of public attitude towards queerness. At the same time, however, I also noticed that public conversations about the film either online or offline did not center on queerness exhibited in the film. The public must have been confused between their imagination of "homosexuality" and what the film was presenting to them.

For my first project as a scholar, I revisit what that film has meant to the South Korean public. It seems obvious to me that the general sentiment toward "homosexuality" has been directed from "ignorance" to "tolerance" since the film's release. After the big hit of *The King and the Clown,* various kinds of (male) queer films were released, and they received relatively favorable comments from the public; this was not the case before *The King and the Clown*. These questions of "why and how this film influenced the general public" led me to ask how the idea of "queerness" or "homosexuality" circulated in public around this film: Did the public think the film portrayed "homosexuality" or not? How did the South Korean public understand "homosexuality?" What was the director's intention? How does the film actually portray "homosexuality" or "queerness?"

The simplest answer for these questions is "ambivalence." The film's same-sex desires, or what the public called "homosexuality," were not expressed through physical or sexual contact between the characters. None of the three male characters showed explicit sexual behaviors such as kissing or having sex (except for one light kiss). At the same time, the audience did notice the subtle desires and love that is more than a simple friendship. This ambivalence enabled the audience to decide on what they wanted to believe about their relationships. And the discrepancies between different readings of these ambivalent relationships caused the public debates whether the film is about homosexuality or not. Starting from this ambivalence, I argue for the characters' queerness (as opposed to homosexuality) by reading the film closely. Based on this queerness, I further claim that the film and the film director imagine queerness in a national frame. Primarily considering the *nationalization* of queerness, this project demonstrates what this seeming change of public attitude towards queer sexuality may signify.

What I term "nationalization of queerness" indicates the frame of attributing queerness to a nation, as opposed to individual subjects, groups and/or subculture. The term is different from the idea of incorporating non-normative sexual subjects into the mainstream national projects. My primary question in this project is how the South Korean public imagines queerness in relation to the concept of nation, as opposed to how a nation takes advantages of queerness for its nationalist projects.

This notion of "nationalization of queerness" demonstrates that these two films participate in the global discourse of queer globalization. The two feature films' understanding of queerness as a national trait signifies that the South Korean public is conscious of the nation's global status. This national frame includes both the rejection of queerness as a foreign culture, and the participation in a "developmentism," in which the South Korean nation seeks "tolerance"

for homosexuality for a "developed" nation-state status. Through the nationalization, queer desires and practices become stigmatized by global economy and politics, as well as race, ethnicity and gender among many others.

This research project is divided into four different chapters. In this chapter, I provide contextualization of homosexuality/queer, film industry and queerness in films. By doing so I contextualize where *The King and the Clown* locates itself among other South Korean "queer films." In Chapter 1, I first examine public and professional reception of the film to investigate the discourse about queerness and homosexuality. Reflecting on the existing critiques, I analyze the cinematic text through close reading and restore queerness in the film that has been mostly ignored or disavowed by professional critics and scholars. Then, I use the framework of "nation" to argue that the film imagines queerness by "nationalizing" it. In this part, the film director's interviews regarding homosexuality in the film are primarily considered. In Chapter 2, I turn to another South Korean feature film with a queer theme *Hello My Love* (2009) to provide a comparative perspective in understanding how the South Korean public imagines queerness. This chapter demonstrates that *Hello My Love* also nationalizes queerness of the characters by juxtaposing national South Korean space with imaginary space France. Finally, I conclude the project by summarizing my main points and provide where South Korean queer representation may be located after the films' release.

Before delving into queer films in the South Korean context, it is important to note how the concept of "queer" is defined, understood and practiced differently from the U.S. queer discourse. In order to answer what makes a film "queer" in South Korea, it is necessary to answer what it means to be "queer" in the South Korean context first. In what follows, I

historicize South Korean queer communities and politics, Korean films and South Korean queer films.

Emergence of Contemporary Queerness in South Korea

It remains unclear when and how contemporary understanding of same-sex sexuality in South Korea started to emerge. After the end of Japanese colonialism on the Korean peninsular in 1945, the Southern half of Korea established its government without the northern counterpart in 1948. The beginning of the South Korean nation-state was soon marked with the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, leading people's concerns to survival. The earliest available records regarding queerness after the desperate situations in South Korea starts in the mid 1960s with a women-loving-women group, Women Taxi Drivers' Association (*Yeowoonhoe* 여운회). It marks the beginning of contemporary queer communities in South Korea based on their attraction, desire and sexuality. Although certain terminologies did not define one's identity, people with non-normative desires between the 1950s and the 1990s considered themselves as different subjects from "normal" people. This time period in the South Korean queer history can be marked as an emergence of the queer community, not necessarily engaging their subjectivities with political consciousness.

Since 1965, Women Taxi Drivers' Association had existed for about 20 years for women who manifested non-normative sexual desires. Consisting of mostly cab drivers, the group was a huge national organization with more than 1200 members. Organized for financial reliance and a communal bond, the group did not hold political agenda. Myeong-dong in Seoul was the main space for the group members to gather and meet. Within the community, the term *bajissi* (바지씨, baji means pants) and *chimassi* (치마씨, chima means skirt) were used to describe masculine and feminine individuals respectively. As the group members considered themselves

as “third sex” or “wrong birth,” some connections between their subjectivity and sexuality were observed, but they did not identify themselves as *dongseongaeja*, or homosexual[1] (Bong 88; C. Han 102-4).

As the South Korean military government ended its dictatorship in 1987, some local gatherings among men who pursued same-sex relationships started to appear without political consciousness. Their community started with small bars in Nakwon-dong of Seoul and increased the number of its number in large metropolitan areas such as Seoul and Pusan (Bong 88; Seo, “*Ingwon”* 73; Seo “Mapping the Vicissitudes” 68-9). Itaewon, the U.S. military camp town in Seoul, also had a community for middle and upper class individuals who sought same-sex encounters (Bong 88-9).

Men’s community also exhibited its own conceptualization of identity in regards to sexual practices. They had a variety of vocabularies to label a type of person with certain characteristics. Feminine men and men who cross-dress were called *Deoduk* (더덕), while married men who have sex with men and take an active role during sex were called *Homo* (호모). People who believed that they were actually women but were trapped in male bodies, and played a passive role during sex with a man were called *Pogal* (보갈). Men who perform sexual services to other men for money were called *Gilnyeo* (길녀*, nyeo* means a woman) (Seo “*Ingwon”* 73). These community-based naming for sexuality demonstrates that community members differentiated themselves from larger society. However, their sexuality certainly did not connote political involvement or social awareness.

[1] Although Han calls the female subjects in the group and the members *lesbian* for convenience throughout her writing, she does not explore how the subjects considered themselves regarding their subjectivity or identity.

These apolitical names for non-normative sexual behaviors faded away as the sexual identity rhetoric emerges during the 1990s. The change was evidently observable in the formations of sexual minority human rights activist groups (Seo "*Ingwon"* 70; 74-6). In 1991, a group called *Sappho* was established in Seoul for lesbians and bisexual women, who were foreigners living in South Korea. Through *Sappho*, six Korean men and women, who identified themselves as gay and lesbian, got together, and started a group called *Chodonghoe* (초동회) in 1993 (Bong 89; C. Han 105-6). Realizing different situations and needs for gay men and lesbian women, however, the group was divided into *Chingusai* (친구사이) for gay population and *Kkirikkiri* (끼리끼리) for lesbian population two months after its start (C. Han 106-7). In 1995, Come Together (컴투게더) and *Maum 001* (마음 001) became the first college student organizations for sexual minorities at Yonsei University and Seoul National University respectively. These two groups, *Chingusai* and *Kkirikkiri* created an umbrella group called Homosexual Human Rights Association on the June 28th, remembering Stonewall struggle (Seo "Mapping the Vicissitudes" 72-3). This collective group gained media attention for the first time as a political activist group for sexual minority rights. During this emergence of political groups for sexual minorities, the terms *gay* and *lesbian* became useful to the activist leaders who work for sexual minorities.

This transition of perception about queer subjectivity within the community from apolitical to political demonstrates the global participation of the local queer community. Embodying Foucauldian concept of "specization of homosexuality" and U.S. identity politics of LGBTQ subjects, queer community start making efforts for visibility, equal rights, and incorporation to the mainstream society (43). As this shift of queer subjectivity features co-existence of apolitical queer bodies (older generations) and politically affirming queer subjects

(younger generations), discourses around homosexuality and queerness contribute to the ambivalence of public understanding regarding non-normative sexual performances and identities.

This ambivalence during the transition of conceptualizing queerness has caused confusions among individuals in identifying queer subjects. For example, although the loanwords such as *gay* and *lesbian* were used before the upsurge of politically conscious environment among queer community, they entailed different meanings in different situations. Before using the term politically to describe a man who sexually desires another man, *ge-i* (게이, gay) was once used to describe a male-bodied person who is feminine or cross-dresses. It sometimes also meant transgender individuals who did not have sex-change surgery (C. Han 103-4). Non-homosexual identified population sometimes used these words to call out and/or demean a person who performs, or identifies themselves with, homosexuality. For example, a short story *Days and Dreams* 낮과 꿈 written by Kang Seok-kyeong in 1983 shows one of the sex workers in the story using the word *homo* (호모) to indicate and degrade men who perform anal sex with other men. The term *lejeubieon* (레즈비언, lesbian) is also used in the story to describe Barbara, a female African-American GI who identifies herself as such. Although Barbara's sexual identity is explained as a born trait to the protagonist Paek-ee and other sex workers in the story, the Korean characters consider lesbianism as a performance rather than an identity (15-24).

Local terms, such as *dongseongaeja* (동성애자) and *iban* (이반), circulated within and outside of queer communities to indicate a subject who practices and/or identifies oneself with same-sex sexuality. The term *dongseongaeja* derives from the word *dongseongae* (동성애), which means "same-sex love." "*-ja*" at the end is a suffix to describe a person who performs or

identifies themselves as the word that precedes the suffix. Therefore, the term *dongseongaeja* signifies a person who performs homosexuality or identifies themselves as a homosexual. According to the online encyclopedia about sexual minorities, offered by Korean Sexual-minority Culture and Rights Center (KSCRC), the term *dongseongae* is a direct translation from the word "homosexuality," which was coined by a Hungarian doctor, Karl Maria Benkert. Quoting its definition from Yun Ga-hyeon's book *Psychology of Homosexuality*, the center implies that this term is imported through the European sexologists into Korea during the 20th century ("Dongseongae*"*).

The term *dongseongaeja* is one of the most used terms to describe a person who performs homosexuality or identifies themselves as a homosexual. It has been used both in- and outside of queer communities in contemporary South Korea. A similar word *dongseongyeonaeja* has also been used along with it. As an effort to restore the sexual morality of lesbian and gay population, however, it has been criticized by Korean LGBT activists that the latter term (*dongseongyeonaeja*) implies that homosexual identity is based on solely sexual desires and eroticism (Seo "*Ingwon"* 75; Seo "Mapping the Vicissitudes" 70). Recently, the word *dongseongaeja* has been used as a *de facto* politically correct term in public media to describe lesbian and gay population in South Korea.

Primarily used within queer community, the term *iban* has been perceived as a term that is similar to *queer* in English because of its universality in describing sexual minority (Park 201). Although the origin of the word is not clear, the most popular explanation is that the word is created after the word *ilban* (일반, 一般), which means "normal." Literally, *il* (一) means "one" and *ban* (般) means "kinds" or "types." Some argue that *i-* is after the syllable meaning "two (二)," implying queer people are the "second class" whereas the normal *ilban* people are the

"first class" citizens (Seo "Mapping the Vicissitudes" 69). Others argue that *i-* is from the syllable meaning "different (異)." From this hypothesis, the term signifies anyone who is *not* "normal" ("Iban").

Although more vocabularies and ideas about queer practices are used in queer communities in South Korea, I have discussed some of the main terms describing non-normative sexual practices and identities. Despite the vastness of terms and practices of queer bodies, I define and use the term *queer* to encompass all the concepts mentioned so far regarding non-normative sexuality in South Korea. In other words, I define *queer* to indicate any kind of same-sex intimate relationships including close friendships, intimate touches and stares, desires, affections, love, emotions, and many others, as well as sexual identities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and etc. By including ambiguous intimacy between same-sex subjects in the term *queer*, I equip the vocabulary to discern and analyze different aspects of homoeroticism that may or may not be defined, performed and identified similarly as contemporary understanding of LGBTQ identity politics.

I use the Anglo-American term *queer* despite other local terms to describe local practices and identities because the term is incorporated into the "public" queer images in South Korea. Local political activist groups and public queer events, such as film or cultural festivals, use the term *queer* to converse with global queer movements. The term *iban* is often used in less official environments by the local queer subjects, which itself requires investigations in regards to global hierarchy and postcoloniality. In this project, the term *queer* is used in order to connect the South Korean local queer movements and the U.S. and Western queer scholarship.

South Korean Film Industry

The cultural productions with local queer subjectivities existed before the time of identity politics for queer people in the 1990s. Especially during the early 20th century, queer discourses took the form of literature. Despite being subtle and indirect, a sense of queer sexuality and desire was exhibited in various poems and novels. However, the intentional ignorance of the literary artworks with queer themes prevented these poems and novels from traveling out to public (Sylvian, and Iwazaru). Since Korean queer literature during this time period dealt with queerness very subtly, the circulation of the works without scholarly discussion did not help to build awareness of local queer desires and sexuality in cultural forms.

The advent of mass media industry and the development of Korean film as a popular culture shaped public culture. Unlike literature, films' fast circulation with visual images and immediate engagement with their audience made it possible to create public culture. The Korean public has become more susceptible to discourses sparked by popular films, and the shared cultural references throughout the nation created more dynamic public conversations. The creation of popular culture and public discourses through films had an influence on the proliferation of (South) Korean popular films with non-normative sexuality, especially since the late 1990s.[2]

In order to discuss the emergence of films with a theme of non-normative sexuality, it is necessary to discuss the political and economic history of cultural production in South Korea. As a Korean Studies scholar Michael Robinson says "No discussion of Korean film or culture is meaningful without considering its production within until recently, an extraordinarily unstable

[2] In his interview about Korean "queer" literature, Gabriel Sylvian says "If the 80s was the decade for poetry, and the 90s the novel, then the 2000s was the decade for theatre, and increasingly, film."

political context," the sphere of queer films in South Korea is not an exception to Robinson's bold statement on Korean politics and films (Robinson 15).

During the early age of a newborn nation-state during the late 1940s and 1950s, South Korean queer films barely had a foundation to grow due to the country's political instability. Featuring Japanese colonialism, the division of the country, the Korean War and the decades of violent dictatorships, the turbulent (South) Korean political history led cultural production at the time to primarily revolve around redressing the political and ideological issues (Jooran Lee 274; Robinson 16-8, 26). Especially during the dictator Park Chung-hee's rule, the Motion Picture Law was enacted in 1962 in order to primarily restrict the industry under the government control. Despite several revisions, the law maintained its function of film restriction until it was replaced with the Film Promotion Law in 1996 (Paquet 34-5).

While maintaining its function of a governmental censorship on contents, the Motion Picture Law's fifth and sixth revision in 1984 and 1986 respectively marked grandiose changes in the system of South Korean film industry. As the fifth revision of the law changed the previous government licensing system into a simple registration system, the number of film production companies drastically increased. Despite the relaxation of film censorship, South Korean film industry faced another obstacles soon after due to the domination of Hollywood studios. Since the Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEAA) demanded the South Korean government to relax its regulations on importing foreign films in 1985, the change of the importing regulations becomes incorporated into the sixth revision. Despite intense protests by Korean film industry, Hollywood studios dominated the local film businesses and changed the distribution system, which impacted harsh on local film production because of the lack of financial sources. The state of crisis lasted until 1992 (Paquet 34-6).

Starting from 1992, *Chaebol* (재벌), South Korean conglomerates, started to invest in film market and became the main financial sources for South Korean films until the Asian financial crisis hit South Korea in 1997. Investments of *Chaebols*, including Samsung, Daewoo, and LG, started primarily because of the flourishing business of VCR manufacturing and the videocassette rental market from the mid-1980s. With a rise of video rights price due to the Hollywood branch offices operating in South Korea, *chaebols* found out that video rights would be cheaper for them to buy if they fund the films at the production level. Moreover, the conglomerates wanted to introduce their business practices to new and young producers from the mid-1980s, who were advocating for a more systematic process of filmmaking in the film industry (Paquet 36-8; 42-3). Furthermore, the government also encouraged the conglomerate investments on film industry. Recognizing the profitability of media industry after the release of Hollywood blockbuster *Jurassic Park* (1993), Kim Young-sam, the first civilian president (as opposed to military) started to promote the film industry (J. Shin 53-4).

In 1996, the Motion Picture Law was replaced with the Film Promotion Law. Even after the systematic change, pre-screening and film censorship continued with the Public Performance Ethics Committee (PPEC), which existed since 1976. Despite the new law's relaxation on censorship rules since the end of the nation's military regime, the committee served a significant role in keeping films with explicit (hetero and homo) sexuality from being released or imported. In October of 1996, Constitutional Court of Korea ruled that it is a violation of the constitution to pre-censor films. This accomplishment of the film industry resulted in the first revision of the Film Promotion Law, which included the replacement of PPEC structure with a civilian rating system in 1997 (Paquet 44-5).

The film business that had been funded by *chaebols* from 1992 started losing its financial support due to the financial crisis that hit South Korea in 1997. As the government was forced to depend on International Monetary Fund, the conglomerates started to eliminat side businesses. Interestingly, however, the withdrawal of the large companies left more space for venture-capital companies to invest in film production with remaining mid-size conglomerates. The success of South Korean film *Shiri* 쉬리 (1999) outnumbering *Titanic* (1999) in the box-office, and continuous economic achievement of South Korean films, such as *Joint Security Area* 공동경비구역 *JSA* (2000) and *Friend* 친구 (2001), boosted the investments of other financial institutions (Paquet 43).

As the history of the South Korean film industry demonstrates, the political freedom with the end of dictatorship and the general economic growth of the nation-state enabled the local film industry to grow exponentially from the late 1990s and onward. As this development of the industry coincided with the growing local queer community during this time period, queer films start to emerge in both feature and independent films.

South Korean Queer films

This is not to say that no films with queer themes existed before then. One of the earliest South Korean "queer films" was released in 1972. *The Pollen of Flowers*, directed by Ha Kil-jong, discusses the destructiveness of human desires through portraying entangled relationships between four people (Jooran Lee 278-9). Released in 1976, *Ascetics: Woman to Woman* has been considered the first "lesbian" film for featuring a same-sex desire between two women. *Does the American Moon Rise Over Itaewon?* was released in 1991, featuring "deviance" and "corruption" of people living in the U.S. military camp town *Itaewon* in Seoul. The film was sensationalized because the filmmaker hired a real-life transgender, instead of hiring an actress

for the role of transgender club hostess (Jooran Lee 279). In 1995, *Mascara* portrayed love and revenge of a transgender hostess ("*Banghwa-edo"*). However, none of these films were able to get enough media attention to start a national level discussion on queerness, let alone economic success.

The first public discussion around a South Korean queer film broke in 1996, as the first South Korean public gay activist, Seo Dong-jin, severely criticized the film *Broken Branches* *내일로 흐르는 강* (1996) for its pathologizing attitude toward homosexuality (Ahn). Portraying homosexuality as a deviant result of a dysfunctional Confucian patriarchal family, the film received unprecedented media attention (Jooran Lee 277).

The discussions regarding queer films in South Korea went further with the importation of Wong Kar Wai's film *Happy Together* in 1997. The release of the film became a huge issue in South Korea since the Public Performance Ethics Committee (PPEC) banned the film for the reason of "explicit" homosexuality. The explanation for the ban was "incompatibility" of South Korean sentiment with homosexuality. This rule sparked a strong opposition against PPEC by the local film community and a large number of Wong Kar Wai's fans in South Korea (J. Kim 620). Despite its ban on importation of the film, the film was illegally screened throughout university districts and queer communities (Y. Shin). Seo also commented on the PPEC that the main problem of the rule is the attitude of PPEC in treating homosexuality as perversion (Seong-uk Lee).

Along with the censorship on *Happy Together*, the local queer community faced another governmental control on public screening of queer films in the same year. Prepared from 1996 by telephone bulletin board communities, college students, and activists, the very first Seoul Queer Films and Videos Festival was supposed to hold in September, 1997. However, the

momentous event of the local queer film history was banned on the very morning under the reason that the films for the festival did not pass the government's review (Kim 621).

As President Kim Dae-jung was elected in 1998, marking the first president from a liberal political party since the establishment of the nation-state, South Korean queer films arrived at another phase of its history. At the interview with presidential candidates before the 1998 election, Kim demanded the needs to approach the issue of sexual minorities as a human rights issue (Lee, and Go). His partial support of queer community and his emphasis on human rights resulted in the revision of censorship law to censor only "excessive" homosexuality. Under Kim's rhetoric of minority human rights, the Seoul Queer Films and Videos Festival could be protected by the new government and hold its actual first celebration in 1998 (Lee 280; J. Kim 623).

The Seoul Queer Films and Videos Festival provided a safe space for queer discourse in South Korea to grow. Changing its name to Seoul Queer Archive in 2001 (now Korea Queer Archive), the film festival was held until 2003 (J. Kim 628). In 2002, the group established Korean Sexual-minority Culture and Rights Center (KSCRC), which became one of the leading queer activist groups. Meanwhile, a number of queer groups in South Korea gathered and started their first Korea Queer Culture Festival (KQCF) in 2000. Similar to Pride Parades throughout the world, the festival includes performances and street march in downtown of Seoul. With the launch of KQCF, Seoul LGBT Film Festival, or SeLFF (formerly Rainbow Film Festival), started in 2000 as well, screening various queer-themed films until today.

Although public spaces for the local queer population (with many limitations) have been created through these struggles, debates on queer films have not been incorporated into a national level of public dialogues. As the two queer film festivals became a place for various

queer films to be screened for queer population, the mainstream queer films developed different history and social interactions from independent ones. Generally speaking, popular queer films have been made by non-queer identified filmmakers and for South Korean non-queer public. On the other hand, independent queer films have been usually made by and for South Korean queer subjects.

Most independent films with queer themes were screened in queer film festivals. They are mostly short and difficult to access. Despite the limits of independent films, there have been some independent queer films that attracted the attention from the public. *No Regret 후회하지 않아* (2006) by Lee-Song Hui-il was screened in selective well-known movie theaters and received favorable public comments. While achieving a large number of box-office admissions for an independent film, *No Regret* also led to several scholarly works about queer films in South Korea. Short independent films such as *Boy Meets Boy 소년, 소년을 만나다* (2008) and *Just Friends? 친구사이?* (2009) by Kim-Jo Gwang-su also received favorable public comments. Recently, an independent documentary film *Miracle on Jongno Street 종로의 기적* (2010) was released, and received some media coverage.

These films' publicity, however, was still limited to a low number of a certain population (such as queer people themselves) to start public discussions throughout South Korea. Feature films with queer themes had more potential to reach a larger population thanks to its funding, promotion and circulation. Starting from the late 1990s, feature films with queer themes, such as *Memento Mori 여고괴담 2* (1999) and *Road Movie 로드무비* (2002), began to emerge, and attempted to reach to general public. In 2005, *The King and the Clown* set all-time box-office record at the time, and *Like a Virgin 천하장사 마돈나* in 2006 was nominated and awarded for several film festivals. While some of them were still ignored by the public and some initiated

public conversations about queerness, they have rarely been studied critically by professional queer critiques and scholarship. In the earlier South Korean film history, the lack of critical assessment of queer films resulted from the ignorance about the issue. However, recent criticisms on queer films either avoid the discussion of sexuality at all, or praise the "originality" for using homosexuality as a cinematic subject. As acceptance of homosexuality has been viewed as a signifier of global modernity and advancement, public media started to praise popular queer films for its progressiveness without critical analyses.

The history of South Korean queer films demonstrates the changes in portrayal of queerness in films. From *The Pollen of Flowers* in 1972 until the late 1990s, a small number of films with same-sex desires and non-normative gender identities were released. Public ignored these queer films, however, and queerness in the films was described and imagined as "abnormal," "deviant" and "perversion" by not only public media but also governmental institutes. After 1995, as the queer community in South Korea increased its visibility, self-claimed and identified queer films start to emerge in queer film festivals. While the independent film sector grows in its own way, feature films with queer themes without a pathologizing attitude emerge starting from *Memento Mori* in 1999. Despite these feature films' increasing popularity, scholarly discussions about queerness have remained minimal. At this moment of South Korean queer films, the film *The King and the Clown*'s popularity and the attention from film critics and scholars mark significant changes in contemporary South Korean film history.

Why *The King and the Clown* (and *Hello My Love*)?

As discussed earlier, I primarily consider *The King and the Clown* in this project because of its unprecedented popularity and its ability to create national conversations about the concept of homosexuality. Additionally, the film's unique characteristics that differentiate it from other

queer films also are worth examining. The historical setting of the 16th century Joseon dynasty to present desires between three male characters, and the characters' queer desires without sexual expressions are interesting factors for a queer film to exhibit. Furthermore, it seems necessary to investigate the fact that the public, professional critics and scholars, as well as the film director, end up disavowing the "homosexuality" in the film. In particular, the director of *The King and the Clown* Lee Jun-ik refuses the label of "queer" and "homosexual" on his film, arguing that it is inappropriate for the Western practice of homosexuality to be put on the "Korean realities" (Jun-ik Lee by Kim).

With favorable reviews at the Jeonju International Festival and its popularity by word of mouth, *Hello My Love* has also gained some public attention from the online media. Despite the low number of admissions and the less attention from the public, I provide an analysis of the film to lay out a comparative perspective on nationalizing queerness.

Other queer films that arguably have gained much public attention during the first decade of the 21st century include *No Regret*, *Like a Virgin, Frozen Flowers* *쌍화점* (2008) and others. *No Regret* has had a huge impact on public despite its independent film status. *Like a Virgin* also is worth noting, for it portrays a "boy" in a small town, who wants to become a woman, in a humorous manner. *Frozen Flowers* caught much attention because it cast two of the most popular actors, and the film was based on the historical records of King Gong-min of Go-ryeo dynasty, who had a number of beautiful palace guards and sexual relationships with them.

Despite its vast material to uncover, films with queer relationships between women are not considered in this project. This project is looking at how popular films with queer themes have shaped the discourse of queer sexuality, but the films with "lesbian" relationship did not gain attention from the public for its queerness as much as the male counterpart did. Arguably,

"lesbian" popular films are differently situated from queer male discourses because the social perception and reaction to the queer relationships are highly gendered[3].

There have existed several films dealing with desires and love between women after the boom of popular queer film productions in the late 1990s. However, these films were not promoted as "lesbian" or "queer" films, unlike the queer-themed films with male subjectivities. Furthermore, the public reactions to the films were also silent regarding female same-sex relationships. Downplaying relationships between women as "exceeding friendship," and situating queer relationships between women as a small segment of a whole story, the films also contribute to invisibility of lesbian subjectivities. Further discussions on the invisibility of female queer subjects and the queer female identity discourse in modern cultural production are in need.

This is not to say that there is no examination of queer relationships among women on the screen. *Memento Mori* (1999), arguably the only popular film that publicly claimed its queer relationship between women, has been discussed by many film scholars and queer studies academics. As a second film of the horror film series *Yeogogoedam* 여고괴담 (Girls' High School Ghost Stories), *Memento Mori* deals with love, jealousy and death among three high school girls. Other popular films that incorporated queer themes of women include *An Indiscreet Wife, A Checkered Husband and A Taekwondo Girl* 철없는 아내와 파란만장한 남편 그리고 태권소녀 (2002), *The Scarlet Letter* 주홍글씨 (2004), and *Five Senses of Eros* 오감도 (2009).

[3] This social phenomenon is related to the gendered consumption of films as a leisure activity. The relationship between female audience and "pretty boy" same-sex performance in cultural production will be briefly discussed during the discussion of *The King and the Clown*. It resonates with the fact that the term "homosexual film" or "queer film" in South Korea is mostly used to describe queer sexuality between men.

Additionally short TV dramas *I Love You, Suhelli 사랑해요 수헬리*(2004) and *Who lives in that house? 그집엔 누가 사나요?* (2006) also thematize female queer relationships[4].

In this chapter, I have looked at how queerness in contemporary South Korea has practiced, and how queer communities have been developed; starting from the mid 1960s, South Korean queer subjects start to create a community space; queer community groups with political agendas emerged throughout the 1990s. I also have contextualized the local film industry and queerness within films in the contemporary era; after the censorship laws under dictatorship, IMF financial crisis, and the competition with Hollywood film domination, the local film industry begins to flourish after the late 1990s. The emergence of visible queer community and more flexible film industry at this time period explains the growth of South Korean queer films, both independent and feature films, in the first decade of the 21st century. The survey of history situates 2000s as a historical moment of drastic changes in public understanding of queerness and queer films. It helps us to locate the film *The King and the Clown* when analyzing how the film imagines queerness.

[4] TV dramas play significant roles in Korean popular culture, if not more, as much as films do. Although there have been some queer-themed TV dramas throughout its history –more male relationships than women's again—, I do not discuss them here primarily because of the discourse's vastness. TV dramas with queer themes need a separate framework and should be discussed by connecting it with queer films.

Chapter 1

Queer, Class and Nation in *The King and the Clown*

The popularity of *The King and the Clown* in South Korea was unprecedented by any other films at that time. The film lasted in theater for 112 days with over 12 million admissions, which equals to a quarter of South Korean population (W. Shin 257). The admission statistics set all time box office record and the film became a national phenomenon. The film's success substantially astonished not only the local film industry and film critics but also the filmmaker himself. One of the surprise factors was the film's historical setting. Throughout the South Korean film history, historical films tend to fail to attract many viewers. However, *The King and the Clown* achieved to be the only historical film with more than 5 million admissions as of 2006 (W. Shin 258). Another reason was that none of the cast of the film was a superstar celebrity. Although the actors and actresses in the film were familiar to the public, the industry did not expect the cast to draw blockbuster-level attention from the public. This leads to another fact that the film was not a Korean style blockbuster movie; it was the only non-Korean blockbuster film that attracted more than 10 million viewers. Nonetheless, none of these reasons could be more astonishing than the fact that a film that employs same-sex configurations achieved the biggest success among all feature films. Considering how previous South Korean feature films that dealt with non-normative sexuality, such as *Road Movie,* had been ignored by the audience, the success of *The King and the Clown* drew the most attention by media and the film critics.

The unexpected popularity despite the film's queerness has directed many attempts to explain the success. One of the interpretations that has been provided by media and scholarship for the film's success is the *Kkonminam* 꽃미남 phenomenon (Hyeong-suk Lee 431-3). The term

kkot-mi-nam is a compound word from "flower" (*kkot,* 꽃) and "a handsome man" (*minam* 미남), referring to a "pretty boy." *The King and the Clown* was the first film that was extremely successful for having a *kkonminam* character, Gong-gil, played by a new actor Lee Jun-ki. Upon the film's release, Lee was promoted as "a man who is prettier than a woman" (W. Shin 432). This *kkonminam* actor Lee has fascinated the female audience of *The King and the Clown* and contributed the film's popularity by spreading the word of mouth and multiple viewings of the film. This phenomenon of pretty boys opened a gate for the mainstream feature films to employ male same-sex eroticism as a niche to attract the young women audience in the future (Hyeong-suk Lee 431-5). The partial inclusion of "gay male" subjectivity for the allegedly heterosexual women contributes to the ambivalence of the public tolerance of queerness in South Korea.

As another attempt to explicitly investigate the reasons for *The King and the Clown*'s success, Shin Won-seon suggests three points as the film's "success codes." Shin assumes that it would have been impossible for the film to succeed if the audience saw "homosexuality" from the film, considering the general homophobic sentiment within the South Korean society. Starting with this hypothesis, her first point argues that the film attracted viewers by the manifestation of depth psychologies of each character, which was "disguised" by the concept of homosexuality. Analyzing the film with Carl G. Jung's psychology, Shin argues that the well-portrayed invisible psychologies of the male characters, which are mistaken as "homosexuality" in the public discourse, attracted audiences.

Her second argument points out that the lack of visible same-sex contacts between the characters as a reason for the film's popularity despite the "homosexual code." Comparing the film with the play *Yi* from which the film was adapted, Shin observes that the film removes the explicit portrayals of homosexual relationships that are explicit in the play. Achieved by this lack

of visibility of homosexuality, the ambiguous relationships between characters enable various interpretations by the audience, who may or may not be homophobic, and reaches out to a broader audience. Finally, Shin suggests that the revival of historically native entertainment in the film was another key to the film's success and popularity. She writes that the film's employment of traditional entertainment culture and practices promoted the awareness of Korean performances, including tightrope performances, satiric mask plays and humorous usages of explicit and sexual vocabularies.

The *kkonminam* phenomenon and Shin's arguments both attempt to find answers for the film's popularity despite the public's ignorance about queerness. However, as I discuss more deeply after the film's plot summary in this chapter, many analyses and critiques that attempt to answer the film's popularity avoid dealing with, or developing on, the film's "sensitive" subject of homosexuality. Other than the two provided examples, many reviews look at the plot techniques, age demographics, visual aesthetics, or competitions with Hollywood films without a discussion around the film's queerness (S. Han; Jeon). While agreeing that considering these factors is crucial to examine a national phenomenon of South Korean popular culture, there is a surprise lack of reading of the film's queerness among existing film critiques and analyses.

Considering public conversations whether or not the film is homosexual/queer, the absence of professional and scholarly discourses about *The King and the Clown* in relation to its queerness stands out. As Michel Foucault suggests, this disparity between everyday conversations and authorized discourses should be understood as a part of a larger discourse, instead of a contrast (27). In this project, I recognize both online conversations of the South Korean public and the silence of professional and academic institutions about the film's queerness as a part of the national discourse.

As an attempt to restore queerness that might have been overlooked by previous discussions, I closely examine two different queer relationships that are presented in the film; one between the main characters Jang-saeng and Gong-gil, and the other between King Yeon-san and Gong-gil. Then I turn to the director of *The King and the Clown* Lee Jun-ik's disavowal on the film's "homosexuality." Differentiating the same-sex configurations in the film as a "Korean reality" from the "Western homosexuality," Lee denies the film's queerness. Using the framework of nationalism and queerness, I examine how Lee conceptualizes queerness as a national entity, distinguished from sexuality "outside." The film nationalizes the characters' queer desires by imagining Korean queerness as de-sexualized desires in a historical setting.

Public Reception

The King and the Clown's popularity among the general film viewers was groundbreaking. According to NAVER[5] Movie evaluation, 33,097 netizens[6] gave on average 9.00 points out of 10 since the release of the film until March 2012. During the first month after the film's release, the film received 9.52 points out of 10 from 22,968 netizens. The poll also provides gender differences as female audience in general gave 9.48 points (71% of the response) while male audience only gave 7.84 (29%). Although it is unofficial data, this statistics suggests a gendered tendency of the audience as women's responses comprise more than two-thirds of the

[5] NAVER 네이버 is one of the most popular South Korean web search engine. This website provides various featured sections including News, Music, Books, Shopping, and many others. NAVER Movie 네이버 영화 is one of these subcategories and provides a virtual space for the online users to utilize information about each film. Netizens can rate a film and leave a comment while the website provides the number of raters, the distribution of ratings, and gender percentages. Considering the popularity of the website, I use its data to provide a general sense of public reaction.

[6] Netizen, a compound word from "network" and "citizen," is more commonly used in South Korea than in the U.S. to refer to online users; Michael Hauben, a computer specialist and author, coined the term in 1992. I use the term for the compatibility with the source language.

total number. It also shows that the male audience members generally like the film less than their female counterpart.

The popularity of *The King and the Clown* started conversations about the film among the general online population. In particular, the idea of "homosexuality" in the film was discussed briefly, but openly on the web. With the grade point evaluations on NAVER movie, each netizen is allowed to write a short comment on the film. Most comments with higher grade points (8~10) mention the films greatness in acting and visual aesthetics. They exhibit sympathy for each character including their "homosexuality" in the film. Some comments with medium grades (5~7) in general acknowledge the film's cinematic achievements but express some doubts about the box office record and the acting ability of the new actor Lee Jun-ki. Finally, many comments with the lowest grades (0~4) express that the film is boring and disgusting because of its portrayal of "homosexuality." Some of them call the film "a trash" or "vomit-inducing." Others point out that the film's success is solely based on the fans of Lee Jun-ki despite his lack of acting skills. Considering the statistics on gender percentage of the ratings, it is deducible that some male audience is more hesitant to rate the film highly on the basis of the film's depiction of "homosexuality" ("Wang-ui namja").

Public conversations regarding the film and its portrayal of homosexuality also take place widely among personal blogs. Some of the bloggers simply express their attraction to the actor Lee Jun-ki, or Gong-gil. A blogger Toshiya, for example, writes that she has watched the film seven to eight times at a theater. Some bloggers directly and indirectly acknowledge the main characters' intimate relationships as love while they do not discuss deeply the meanings of their "homosexuality." Analyzing the film's finale, blogger eleshim interprets Jang-saeng's feeling toward Gong-gil as love and discuss the emotional aspects of their tragedy. Despite its rarity,

some bloggers specifically discuss whether the main characters' relationships are "homosexual" or close intimate friendship. Yiin 123 directly questions if the film is a homosexual film based on a lack of sexual contacts between the main characters in the film. While the general population's conversations about homosexuality in the film exhibit numerous different reactions, these online discussions clearly demonstrate how *The King and the Clown* has enabled the debates around homosexuality to be publicly visible.

Despite the overwhelmingly favorable reception by the general public, film critics and professional film journalists are more hesitant to acclaim *The King and the Clown*. The average grade point of six film critics from a popular South Korean film magazine *Cine 21* marks 6.67 out of ten. Their critiques primarily consider the meaning and cinematic effects of the clowns' *Gwangdaenori* 광대놀이, or their performances in the film. Examining King Yeon-san's contact with the clowns' theatrical performances, Lee Jong-do discusses the inversions of audience and actors, and reality and fiction. While Lee Sang-yong also discusses the blurred borderlines of reality and imagination through the performances, Nam Da-eun comments on the gender and power inversions that the artistic performances bring out in the film.

Compared to the prevalence of the film critiques in the light of cinematic aesthetics and filmic reviews, however, discussions regarding homosexuality and queerness exhibited in the film happen to be eluded or ignored by some critics. The same critics who discuss the cinematic effects above simply do not engage in deeper conversations about queerness of the characters. Lee Jong-do does not problematize the relationship between Gong-gil and Jang-saeng at all by calling it a "friendship." Although Lee Sang-yong does mention the main characters' same-sex

desires, he does not delve into the meaning of their relationships (Merong)[7]. Nam writes that there exists "homosexual tensions" in the film, and she argues that the film's tragedy comes from the irony of power relationship, not from the issue of homosexuality. Nevertheless, she does not specify what she means by the "issue of homosexuality" in the film.

As film critiques mainly consider cinematic techniques, scholarly articles about *The King and the Clown* also center on filmic aspects and seemingly avoid the topic of homosexuality and queerness in the film. Most scholarly texts solely examine visual and technical changes that occur from the genre shifts (from the play *Yi* to the film *The King and the Clown*). Although a few scholars provide psychological analyses on the film characters, their psychoanalyses do not explore the issue of homosexuality. While Kim Myeong-hui analyzes King Yeon-san and Jang-saeng's masculinity based on Enrich Neumann psychology, she does not mention a notion of queerness at all in her work. Although Shin Won-seon, who is discussed earlier, attempts to explain the film's seeming queerness, she soon disavows it by saying this queerness is a disguise of manifestations of each character's depth psychology.

As discussed so far, many professional film critics and scholars tend to avoid the subject of queerness in their discussion, and the produced literatures about the film do not center on queerness despite the public's attention on the main characters' queer desires and relationships. However, this is not to say that no attempt for queer readings has been made. A film critic Heo Moon-yeong and a gay novelist Han Jung-ryeol engage with the film's queerness in different ways. In his thorough film critique, Heo denies the film's categorization as a "homosexual" film. Even though he acknowledges the characters' desires for each other, Heo writes, "homosexuality

[7] Lee Sang-yong's film critique was available on a personal blog by another online user. I could not access to the original copy because the film magazine *Film 2.0 (필름 2.0)*, which originally published Lee's article, stopped circulating. Its official website was closed and I could not find any source of archives that have the past magazine issues at least in the U.S.

in this film is not living energy that breaks the boundaries of, or that creates a tension with, traditional values[8], but oppressed and fixed unspeakable suppression." Heo argues that the portrayed homosexuality in the film remains under the social oppression because no character fights for their desire or affection against this social taboo. For Heo, these queer subjects remain silenced and suffer from the social prohibition of homosexuality. His interpretation of the characters' same-sex desire in the film demonstrates how he defines the category of "homosexual film." For Heo, a film can be classified as a "homosexual film" when its characters' desires fight against an oppressive society, and possibly their emotions are spoken or acted out bluntly. In addition, his remarks on social oppression manifest how he conceptualizes the idea of homosexuality based on the rhetoric of "the closet."

While Heo hesitates to claim the film's "homosexuality," Han Jung-ryeol explicitly claims the film as a queer (퀴어 *kwi-eo*) film and argues that the film deals with homosexuality. Criticizing the absence of critiques that discuss the film's queerness, Han rhetorically asks readers for a reason why the film is not categorized as a "queer (퀴어 *kwi-eo*) film." Using the terms "queer (퀴어 *kwi-eo*)," "homosexuality (동성애 *dongseongae*)," and "gay (게이 *ge-i*)" interchangeably, he answers that it is because "[the gay romance (게이로맨스 *ge-i romenseu*)] is too beautiful." In other words, the homophobic public does not categorize this beautiful story as a "gay film" because the "homosexual films" are imagined as ugly, dirty and overly sexual. Acclaiming the film for its "gay" romantic story, Han argues that the beauty of Gong-gil, the absence of sexual expressions, and the portrayal of same-sex love through care and sacrifice has kept the film from some homophobic discourses in public. While Heo and Han's discussion

[8] I translated *Yul-beop* 율법 as "traditional value," as opposed to "law" because the author did not mean to say "law" as in a modern sense. Furthermore, laws regarding homosexuality, such as "sodomy law" in the West, did not exist in the Joseon dynasty.

about queerness in the film arguably suggest different possibilities of cinematic imaginations of Korean queerness, their interpretations still lack a detailed analysis of the film's queerness.

The online users, film critics and scholars have imagined the concept of queerness through various frameworks. By denying the film's queerness, the discourse reveals that how they imagine what "queerness" should be. For some people, the lack of sexual intimacy between same-sex subjects is important in deciding one's queerness. Others believe that gender relations on a psychological level explain seeming same-sex desires as inner heterosexual desires, including the Oedipal approach to the King's desire for Gong-gil. Some defines the film's homosexuality or queerness to be a mental struggle and resistance against the heteronormative social norms. In what follows, I participate in this discourse about the film's queerness as I argue that the queerness between Jang-sang, Gong-gil and the King Yeon-san is characterized by care, sacrifice and prostitution.

Care and Sacrifice: Jang-saeng and Gong-gil

While some have argued that the relationship between Jang-saeng and Gong-gil is simply a close friendship with some unique features, others have portrayed it as an unattainable homosexual love. No matter how their relationship is defined, however, it is undeniable that the film portrays their relationship to be highly intimate. I claim this ambivalent intimacy (more affection and desire than a "common" close friendship but not exerted physically and/or sexually) to be queerness, which may or may not include sexual aspects of same-sex desire and relationship. As Han points out that film presents the two characters' love through their care and sacrifice, many scenes throughout the film manifest their queerness by showing their deep care for each other.

Their queerness is observable from the beginning as the film starts with a *namsadangpae* 남사당패, a group of itinerant male performers, performing at a nobleman's house. Jang-saeng and Gong-gil are performing in the nobleman's front yard with their crew. However, noticing the nobleman whispering to the leader of *namsadangpae,* angry Jang-saeng stops performing because he knows that the nobleman wants Gong-gil's body. Paid with a few potatoes for dinner because of the interruption, the leader of the group gestures to Gong-gil to "serve" the nobleman for better meals. Seeing this, Jang-saeng stops Gong-gil from going to the nobleman's room. Angered leader by looking at Jang-saneg's behavior, he beats Jang-saeng up. Despite being beaten up by the leader for stopping Gong-gil, determined Jang-saeng throws himself to keep Gong-gil from being sexually exploited. Jang-saeng yells, "Stop pimping around Gong-gil! 공길이 팔아먹고 사는 짓 그만해!" His outrage confirms that the leader of the group has pimped Gong-gil for a while. As the leader beat Jang-saeng severely, Gong-gil tells the leader to stop and heads toward the nobleman's room. Gong-gil demonstrates his care for Jang-saeng by showing his will to sacrifice himself than seeing Jang-saeng beaten. Passed out from the battering, Jang-saeng wakes up some time later. Served with large meals, one of the group members chastises Jang-saeng for minding another person's business. Considering other group members' ignorance of Gong-gil's forced prostitution, Jang-saeng's will to protect Gong-gil despite humiliation and physical violence demonstrates that Gong-gil is not just "another person" for Jang-saeng; Gong-gil is Jang-saeng's inextricable part of his life. Awoken Jang-saeng directly goes to the nobleman's room and catches the nobleman before sexual exploitation. While running away from the nobleman's servants and the group members, Jang-saeng and Gong-gil protect each other by fighting them and even accidently killing the group's leader. As

this scene indicates, their effort to save and protect each other despite risking their lives shows their care for each other, and suggests queerness in their relationship.

Jang-saeng and Gong-gil's queerness through their sacrifice for each other becomes more evident as the two characters confront critical situations at the end of the film. As King Yeon-san's obsession with Gong-gil grows, the King's concubine Nok-su comes up with a conspiracy that will get rid of Gong-gil. Abusing the fact that Gong-gil knows how to write in Korean writing system *Han-geul* 한글[9], Nok-su commands her eunuch servant to make a fake poster debasing the King in Gong-gil's handwriting. Showing the fake poster to the King, Nok-su urges him to punish Gong-gil. Nok-su and King Yeon-san show up to the place where Jang-saeng and Gong-gil stay, and Nok-su has him write down what is written on the fake poster. As Gong-gil's handwriting is the same as the one in the poster, Nok-su accuses Gong-gil of the crime and the King cannot believe that Gong-gil has done it. Not knowing the conspiracy, Gong-gil begs for mercy. Seeing this, Jang-saeng lies to the King that he wrote it himself using the fact that they have the same handwriting. The King orders to kill Jang-saeng the next day and Gong-gil is devastated. Jang-saeng's lie is an act of sacrifice because he knows that he will be put to death for a crime that he never committed. Knowing that Gong-gil would never do such a thing, Jang-saeng risks his life to save Gong-gil from a conspiracy.

This queer affection and love of Jang-saeng and Gong-gil become more visible as their care and sacrifice to protect each other are manifested in a death-imminent situation. In other words, as their sacrifice for each other grows to be more explicit, this visibility of sacrifice leads to more apparent revelation of their queer affection and feelings for each other. When Jang-saeng

[9] Hangeul is a writing system that is created by King Se-Jong the Great and scholars in the mid-15th century. At the time, women and lower caste population used Hangeul while upper class elites used Chinese characters for writing.

is arrested again for criticizing the King of having sexual relationships with Gong-gil, of which the scene is revisited later, the furious King aims his sword at Jang-saeng. Gong-gil runs out in front of Jang-saeng to protect him from death. He begs the King for mercy on Jang-saeng.

> 공길: … 어찌, 어찌 왕의 손에 천한 놈의 피를 묻히려 하십니까?
> 연산: 그래, 그럼 네가 베라
> 공길: 차라리 저를 베십시오…
> 장생: 날 쳐라! 난 더이상 잃을것이 없는 놈이다. 어서 쳐라!
> 연산: 잃을게 없어? (신하에게) 여봐라, 이 놈의 눈을 불로 지져라!
>
> Gong-gil: (to the King) …why, why would a King pollute his hand with blood of the vulgar?
> King Yeon-san: Well said, then you slay [him]
> Gong-gil: Rather please slay me.
> Jang-saeng: Hit me! I don't have anything to lose. Hit [me] now![10]
> King Yeon-san: Nothing to lose? (to his subject) Hear me out, sear this bastard's eyes with fire!

As Gong-gil throws himself to save Jang-saeng's life, upset and jealous King orders Gong-gil to kill Jang-saeng. Deeply caring for Jang-saeng, Gong-gil asks the King to kill Gong-gil instead of Jang-saeng. Gong-gil would rather give up his life than see Jang-saeng die because of him. Then Jang-saeng provokes the King to kill Jang-saeng himself saying he does not have anything to lose anymore. It is crucial to recognize Jang-saeng's remark that he has "nothing to lose anymore 더이상 잃을 것이 없는 놈이다." Born as the lowest of the lowest, Jang-saeng never had any wealth or power to lose in the first place. His remark indicates that all Jang-saeng needed was Gong-gil when he owned nothing. However, now thinking that he lost Gong-gil to the King, Jang-saeng feels that he lost everything, and death does not fear him anymore. This

[10] While Gong-gil speaks to the King in honorific form, Jang-saeng in this scene yells at the King with the lowest speech level in Korean, embodying the tone of challenge severely.

Gong-gil attempts to save Jang-saeng

comment from Jang-saeng's sacrifice reveals his queer desire and love for Gong-gil in a more visible way.

As the ambivalence of their affection turns to be more evident towards the end of the film, the queer desire and love between the two characters, which are exhibited mainly through care and sacrifice, are finally outspoken in the last scene. Blind Jang-saeng narrates what follows on the rope in his last tightrope performance:

> 어릴적 광대패를 처음 보고는, 그 장단에 눈이 멀고,
> 광대짓을 할때는 어느 광대놈과 짝맞춰 노는게 어찌나 신이 나던지… 그
> 신명에 눈이 멀고
> 한양와서는 저잣거리 구경꾼들이 던져주는 엽전에 눈이 멀고
> 얼떨결에 궁에 와서는…(울먹이며) 와서는… 그렇게 눈이 멀어서
> 볼 걸 못보고, 어느 잡놈이 그놈 마음을 훔쳐가는걸 못보고…
>
> When seeing clowns for the first time as a kid, (I was) blinded by the rhythm,

> When clowning around, how exciting to pair with some clown… (I was) blinded by the excitement,
> When coming to Han-yang, (I was) blinded by the coins thrown by the street audiences,
> When coming to the palace before I knew it… (on the verge of crying) it… (I was) blinded like that,
> Couldn't see what I should see, couldn't see a random guy stealing that guy's heart…

In his narration, Jang-saeng describes the joy to pair with "some clown 어떤 광대놈[11]." As the camera shows Gong-gil's face at this moment, the film confirms that this "some clown" is Gong-gil. This comment is an indirect confession that Jang-saeng was happy and excited to be together and partnered with him. The blurred borderline between "together as a couple" and "together as performance partners" demonstrates queerness of their relationship. Without the needs to define what kind of "partnership" is, Jang-saeng publicly confesses his queer affection and desire for Gong-gil.

Jang-saeng also confesses his anger and sadness of losing Gong-gil from him by saying "couldn't see a random guy stealing that guy's[12] heart…어느 잡놈이 그놈 마음을 훔쳐가는걸 못보고…" As the film camera shows sad King Yeon-san and Nok-su looking away from Jang-saeng and Gong-gil, it is clear that "a random guy 어느 잡놈" signifies the King. By narrating this segment, Jang-saeng confirms his despair of losing Gong-gil to the King. Jang-saeng's disheartenment reaffirms his love and desire for Gong-gil more directly. This confirmation of his emotions leads Gong-gil to express his affection towards Jang-saeng.

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[11] In the source text, the word *gwangdaenom 광대놈* is a gendered term for a male subject. Jang-saeng's confession of his excitement to be with this "some clown" is directly referred to be with another man.

[12] In the source text, it is more clear that the word *geunom 그놈,* or "that guy," signifies "some clown," or Gong-gil, since both words for "that gay" and "some clown" *gwangdaenom 광대놈* both has the ending of *nom 놈,* which can be translated as "a guy."

Blind Jang-saeng narrates on a tightrope.

Not knowing if Gong-gil was watching him, Jang-saeng is surprised to hear his voice. As Gong-gil and Jang-saeng stand on the ends of the tightrope, they express their emotions toward each other metaphorically in the form of their performance. To Gong-gil's question of what he wants to be re-born in the next life, Jang-saeng says no to nobleman and King, but says he will be a clown again in his next life:

장생: …난 광대로 다시 태어날란다.
공길: 이놈아! 광대짓에 목숨을 팔고도 또 광대냐?
장생: 그러는 네년은 뭐가 되고프냐?
공길: 나야, 두말 할 것없이 광대, 광대지!

장생 운다.

Jang-saeng: … I will be born as a clown.
Gong-gil: You bastard! After selling your life for clowning, a clown again?
Jang-saeng: Then what do you wench want to become?
Gong-gil: For me, needless to say clown, a clown!

Jang-saeng cries.

To Jang-saeng's answer, Gong-gil rhetorically scolds at him to make a foolish choice. As Gong-gil criticizes Jang-saeng for the answer, Jang-saeng asks him the same question. Gong-gil says that he will be a clown without a question. The ironic attitude of Gong-gil in this conversation generates the dramatic atmosphere about his answer. Knowing the hardship and adversity of a clown's life, Gong-gil also chooses to be a clown. This choice implies Gong-gil's desire to be with Jang-saeng even in afterlife, which makes Jang-saeng cry. Their affection and desire for each other finally is confirmed at the final scene of the film.

As we have seen so far, Jang-saeng and Gong-gil's relationship exhibits intimate care and unlimited sacrifice for each other. As their desire and love was performed mainly by these indirect actions and emotions, no physical or sexual tension between the two is observed. This lack of physical intimacy may be tempting for some reviewers ignore their desire and love. However, the ambiguous queerness of their relationship grows to more apparent confession as the film reaches to a climax, and their love for each other is finally confirmed at the end of the film.

Desire and Madness: The King

Despite the film's main focus being the story of Jang-saeng and Gong-gil, most analyses of the film have centered on the character King Yeon-san and his desire for Gong-gil. Arguing that the King's desire for Gong-gil is simply differently appropriated longing for his lost mother, they limit the King's queerness as a heterosexual and incestual desire. However, this Oedipal approach to the King's queer desire for Gong-gil does not explain how and why *Gong-gil* becomes a substitute "mother figure" for the King (W. Shin; Heo). Basing their analyses on a

heteronormtive framework, these critiques only look at Gong-gil's embodiment of a woman while ignoring his queer (male and female) manifestation. Although Gong-gil's performance of his lost mother does give the King a reason to desire Gong-gil more than before, the personification does not take place until the latter part of the film.

Contrary to many critiques assumptions, the King's queer desire starts from his first encounter with Gong-gil, knowing that Gong-gil is a man. There are three scenes where his growing interest and desire for Gong-gil are observed before Gong-gil's personification of the King's mother. After laughing at Gong-gil's improvisation in the clowns' first performance at palace, King Yeon-san directly comes down from his throne to see Gong-gil's face closely. Looking at surprised Gong-gil's face, the King smiles slightly. This scene directly shows the King's interest in Gong-gil. That night, his concubine Nok-su comments on how King Yeon-san could not stop staring at Gong-gil.

> 녹수: 그, 내 흉내 낸 그 광대놈 말이야, 당신이 어찌나 뚫어지게 쳐다보는지, 그놈 얼굴에 구멍 안났나 몰라.
>
> Nok-su: That, that clown who played me, you stared at him so hard that I wonder if he now has a hole in his face.

Nok-su rhetorically comments on how King Yeon-san could not stop looking at Gong-gil, who played Nok-su in the performance. Her statement about the King's gaze on Gong-gil out of her slight jealousy confirms his interest in Gong-gil despite Gong-gil being a man.

Another scene where the King's interest in Gong-gil is portrayed as a queer desire is their second performance that satirically criticizes politicians for their corruption. In this performance, Gong-gil plays the role of a nobleman's wife, who bribes a higher

official with money and sexual favor. Beautifully dressed with a make-up on, Gong-gil's beauty attracts the King and makes Nok-su concerned. The film emphasizes the King's glare at Gong-gil as the camera contrast it with Nok-su's irked face. During the music performance, the King dances with Gong-gil, which angers Nok-su. At the end of the performance, he specifically asks Gong-gil's name.

As the King calls Gong-gil on the same night, Jang-saeng's concerned face and the situation remind the audience of the beginning of the film. Although the King's request to see Gong-gil generates suspicions of sexual exploitation, however, it turns out that the King simply wants to play with Gong-gil. To the King's request, Gong-gil plays a small puppet show. A male puppet has the face of Jang-saeng's mask and a female puppet has the face of Gong-gil's mask. Portrayed as a loving couple by Gong-gil, the two puppets' intimacy implies the queer relationship Jang-saeng and Gong-gil. However, the King, who has been watching Gong-gil's performance, takes the male puppet and plays himself. As the King takes the puppet away from Gong-gil, the male puppet becomes a personification of the King. The shift of the male puppet's persona from Jang-saeng to the King foreshadows the shift of "the man" for Gong-gil. The male puppet by the King strokes Gong-gil's puppet's head lightly and gesture their shyness, which is a common scene of Korean romantic stories. This gesture mediated by the puppet play suggests King Yeon-san and Gong-gil's queer romance and desire. As Gong-gil continues to entertain the King with his props, the King becomes occupied Gong-gil's warmth and care. Gong-gil and King smiles at each other, suggesting their affection. These three scenes demonstrate that the King's desire is not formed only by the

Puppet show by Gong-gil

King Yeon-san takes a puppet

psychological effects from Gong-gil's personification of the King's mother. As shown above, the King's queerness is manifested through the development of his desire for Gong-gil since the first encounter.

Unlike Jang-saeng's queer desire for Gong-gil, the King expresses his desire through a kiss after the King's desire for Gong-gil grows. As the King's desire for Gong-gil grows deeper after Gong-gil's performance as the King's mother, the King's obsession about Gong-gil becomes stronger. Despite Gong-gil's desire to leave the palace with Jang-saeng, the King ignores his request and gives him a title as a sign of his care and affection. As Gong-gil faints from being the center point of the political bloodshed, the King's desire for Gong-gil reaches a culmination. He kisses Gong-gil, who has already fainted.

Despite his emotional and physical manifestation of desire, King Yeon-san seems to show contradictory emotions when confronting Jang-saeng's interpolation on his desire. The King displays severe anger when Jang-saeng criticizes the King for "sexual relationships" with Gong-gil in front of the King's room through his satirical performance. Starting with sarcasm regarding the King's violence and sexual immorality, Jang-saeng's tightrope performance accuses the King of having a sexual relationship with a man, Gong-gil.

> …아 이놈이 기생들 요분질이 시시해지니까 이번에는 사내놈하고 붙어먹는 짓도 서슴치 않는데, 그 비역질이 보통 비역질과 달라서 밥이 나오고, 비단옷이 나오고, 벼슬까지 나오는 비역질인데…

> … Ah, as this bastard is getting bored by the prostitutes' hip movements, this time he doesn't hesitate to commit adultery with a man, and because that anal sex[13] is different from other common ones, food, silk clothes, and even a title is rewarded to that man from that anal sex…

While Jang-saeng narrates about the King's killings and sexual immorality, the King does not react to Jang-saeng's debasing comments. However, when Jang-saeng's narration starts condemning the King's relationship with a man ("he doesn't hesitate to commit adultery with a man, 사내놈하고 붙어먹는 짓도 서슴치 않는데…), the King straightens his face with anger and leaves the window to shoot arrows at Jang-saeng.

This is the moment where Heo argues for the King and Jang-saeng's self-denial of their homosexual desire. In his critique, he writes that the King and Jang-saeng both "… internally do not accept [their] homosexuality 동성애" because Jang-seang blames the King for his "homosexuality," and the King reacts to Jang-saeng's condemnation of homosexual behaviors with rage. However, Heo's essentializing conclusion about their queerness results from disregarding the complexity of the historical position of male same-sex desires and intersectional approach to class and sexuality in Joseon dynasty. According to historical documents and research I discuss in what follows, same-sex sexual relationships between men were not uncommon practices among the lower class population in this era. Jang-saeng's fury cannot be explained as self-hatred toward his desire when he never exhibits his agony over his "unacceptable desire." King Yeon-san also does not deny his queer desire for Gong-gil

[13] I translated 비역질 as anal sex, instead of sodomy, because the term seems not to have degrading connotations at this time period, which might not be the case for contemporary Korean speakers. In *Joseonui eumdampaeseol* (*Erotic Stories of Joseon)*, which I discuss in the next page, the term was used simply to indicate the sexual penetration through anus during the Joseon dynasty.

Jang-saeng publicly criticizing the King

throughout the film. Other characters, such as politicians, in the film problematize the King's desire for Gong-gil not because of his gender, but because of his status.

Sexuality, let alone homosexuality, during the Joseon dynasty is considered to be oppressed and ostracized because of the influence and the development of Confucianism in the nation. The impact of Confucianism was indeed significant throughout the peninsula during the time period. However, the philosophical thoughts and restrictions were more influential to royal families and upper class elites. While most of the restored historical accounts around homosexuality primarily consider royal family and upper class officials, a Japanese scholar Someya Tomoyuki has discovered a collection of sexual jokes and stories in Joseon called *Ki-i-jaesangdam* 기이재상담 (紀伊齋常談) in 2008. Someya argues, "Joseon had bright, open, and humorous sexual culture" among common people (Jo). A recently published book *Joseonui eumdampaeseol* 조선의 음담패설 (Erotic Stories of Joseon), which is an edition of *Ki-i-jaesangdam* and other collections of sexual stories throughout Joseon dynasty, includes two

The King does not care about criticism.

The King straightens his face.

stories of detialed sexual intercourses between men in addition to numerous other explicit sexual stories. Considering the possibility of deliberate erasure of records with explicit sexuality throughout the 500 years of the Kingdom's history thanks to the Confucian philosophy, Someya's argument is convincing.

Someya's explanations on male homosexuality during the Joseon dynasty is further substantiated by historical accounts and stories about same-sex sexual behaviros in *Namsadang* 남사당, to which Jang-saeng and Gong-gil belong in the film. These itinerant theater performer groups only consisted of males and were considered to be the lowest of the lowest during the Joseon dynasty, living through their performances for noblemen. According to the official website for *Namsadang (Yurangyeinjipdan namsadang munhwa* 유랑예인집단 남사당 문화*),* the group was hierarchically divided, and the lowest newcomers were called *Ppiri* 삐리. *Namsadang* was divided into two designations, *amdongmo* 암동모 and *sutdongmo* 숫동모[14]. The lowest rank *ppiris* were designated as *amdongmo* whereas the other members above *ppiris* in rank were considered *sutdongmo*. Each *amdongmo* and *sutdongmo* was paired up and worked as a couple. If necessary, an *amdongmo* prostituted himself to men outside of their *namsadang* group to earn some money or food. These *ppiris* were mostly in charge of female roles in their theatrical plays. One of the *namsadang* stories provided by the website shows a story of a *sutdongmo* who never has a sexual relationship with his *amdongmo* because he loves the new *amdongmo* very much. The story narrates that most sexual relationships between the couples in the *namsadang* were from their needs for sexual practice, but this *sutdongmo* was different.

Supporting the commonplace of male same-sex sexual behaviors among lower castes, Stephen O. Murray writes *namsadang's* male same-sex relationships were not stigmatized as an

[14] "am" is a prefix to describe female while "su(t)" is a prefix to describe male.

aberration. Murray quotes some observations by Father Richard Rutt, who studied Korean culture for 20 years, to support his argument: "The competition among the *Namsadang* groups for handsome *Ppiri* was noticeable… Their homosexuality does not seem to have concerned their audience, the common people" (qtd in Murray 169). Rutt further describes the commonplace of the same-sex relationships in *Namsadang* groups by arguing, "among the itinerant players—the dancers and acrobats and puppet-show people—p[e]derasty, male prostitution, and regular homosexual marriages, sometimes with transvestitism, were common and well known" (qtd in Murray 170). Murray's discussions about Father Rutt's observations emphasize how common the same-sex sexual and emotional bonds were especially in the social groups of *namsadang.*

If considered these historical accounts, it is less convincing to argue that Jang-saeng criticizes the King and Gong-gil's same-sex sexual intercourse because his intolerance of such behaviors. However, a possible explanation for Jang-saeng's accusation of sexual acts follows as his sarcastic performance continues. Jang-saeng criticizes the King (and Gong-gil) that Gong-gil earns wealth (food and clothes) and power (a title) by selling his body to the King. Jang-saeng further mentions that "…that anal sex is different from other common anal sex 그 비역질이 보통 비역질과 달라서…," distinguishing the King's same-sex intercourse from other, common people's same-sex sexual relationship because of the material goods that Gong-gil receives. In other words, Jang-sang's accusation of their sexual relationship stems from his anger and spite against the King for using his power and authority to "steal" Gong-gil from him. What Jang-saeng is criticizing is not the aspect of same-sex sexuality, but the immorality of prostitution.

Jang-saeng's fury against the King and Gon-gil's sexuality is unsurprising if Jang-saeng's asexual manifestation of his desire is examined closely. As he has witnessed Gong-gil being

sexually exploited by many different men from the beginning of their relationship/companionship, Jang-saeng has been protecting Gong-gil from other men's manipulations. Caring deeply for Gong-gil, Jang-saeng's desire toward Gong-gil can never be through sexuality. He despises other men who have abused their power to sexually exploit Gong-gil. His own expression of his desire and love is manifested in the scene where Jang-saeng pulls the blanket for Gong-gil when they are sleeping in the same room (Heo). As Gong-gil comes back from the King's room for the first time, Jang-saeng assumes that the King has sexually manipulated Gong-gil. By covering Gong-gil up with the blanket, Jang-saeng manifests his wish to protect Gong-gil from sexual and physical exploitation by the King.

Considering his asexual care and love for Gong-gil, Jang-saeng is furious not only at the King for luring Gong-gil with his wealth and power but also at Gong-gil for offering his body to the king for the material goods. Gong-gil's sympathy and affection towards the King is difficult for Jang-saeng to accept because Jang-saeng believes that Gong-gil has betrayed him for what he cannot offer. Jang-saeng cannot help feeling that his care and love cannot compete with the King's wealth and power.

Although Jang-saeng's comment on same-sex sexual behavior is not based on his unacceptability of queer desire, it may be tempting to read the King's anger at Jang-saeng's comment as his unacceptability of homosexuality. Indeed, the King is not a part of a lower caste population and their understanding of same-sex desire may be different from common people. However, Park Gwan-su's introduction to his study on Korean male homosexuality suggests that upper-class noblemen found male same-sex sexual relationships common as well. Park starts his article with a part of traditional song *Gunsaseorumtaryeong* 군사설움타령 in *Jeokbyeokga*

Jang-saeng pulls the blanket for Gong-gil

적벽가, one of the only five P'ansori[15] songs that has been passed down until today (390). This specific section consists of a soldier's explicit description of how he was anally penetrated by another soldier. The narration entails detailed descriptions of the process of anal sexual intercourse. Park argues that this scene would have been dropped out if the listeners, who were mostly noblemen, considered same-sex sexual performances uncommon and abnormal. Park suggests that it is plausible to assume that same-sex sexual acts among men were not unthinkable to upper class population (391). Park's suggestion is substantiated by the fact that King Yeon-san, and other royal families and upper class elites in the film, simply do not find the King's desire for another man problematic (none of the characters in the film points out that the King's desire for Gong-gil is problematic because he is a man; it is because he is a clown, the lowest of the lowest).

[15] A genre of Korean traditional narrative songs

Even if the upper class and royal family in the film were conscious of Confucian values, it is difficult to assume that the King's rage against Jang-saeng stems from the King's rejection of his homosexual desires based on moral values because, as the film describes, the King does not allow any social rules to stop him. The royal rules and traditional values, which are characterized with his ancestors and his father, are the source of the King's greatest fear and anger. When the King rejects to follow all types of moral values, it is unlikely for him to believe that his dedicated love for Gong-gil is more immoral than having sexual relationships with prostitutes and murdering numerous political figures.

Considering he does not deny his desire towards Gong-gil throughout the film, the King is furious at Jang-saeng's description of his relationship with him, rather than his desire and love towards Gong-gil. The King manifests his anger when he hears that "he doesn't hesitate to commit adultery with a man, 사내놈하고 붙어먹는 짓도 서슴치 않는데…" The film does not show a physical encounter between the King and Gong-gil while Jang-saeng believes that the King calls Gong-gil at night often for sexual favors. Whether or not the King has had a sexual relationship with Gong-gil, Jang-saeng's description of the relationship between them as a sexual one infuriates the King. The words such as "adultery" and "anal sex" is not more or less offensive than "prostitutes' hip movements," which is used to describe the King's sexual lust by Jang-saeng. These "not-offensive" terms become offensive to the King because they describe his relationship with Gong-gil, whom the King desires and cares about, unlike other people. As the King desires Gong-gil not for his sexuality but for his subjectivity, the vulgar words to his desire are unforgiveable. The King cannot see his sincere love for Gong-gil being degraded with the vulgar words that humiliate their relationship. He is angry at Jang-saeng for characterizing his affection towards Gong-gil with sexual lust.

I have examined the King's queer desire for Gong-gil closely and discussed how it is manifested as more than a longing for his mother throughout the film. King Yeon-san's interest in Gong-gil starts from their first meeting and it develops to sincere desire and love as the film unfolds. Investigating historical accounts of same-sex desires between men during the time period in particular, I have restored the queerness of Jang-sang and King Yeon-san in a controversial scene.

Disavowing, De-sexualizing, and Nationalizing Queers

In her work about nationalism and transnationalism in Lesbian and Gay studies, Jyoti Puri writes how a "nation" is imagined and maintained. Quoting Benedict Anderson's book on nationalism, Puri emphasizes that nationalisms are invented based on "claims of a deep historical past and of common cultural traditions" although the modern concept of "nation" appears only after the nineteenth century (428). In other words, the people in a nation are constantly forced to believe that the population in the nation share the same history, language, religion, ideology and, identity.

Despite this imagined sameness within a nation-state, various inequalities exist. In particular, a nation that is characterized with male-ness and heterosexual-ness leads to national violence of erasure and denial of the deviations from the norm (women and queer subjects). According to Puri and many other feminist scholars, "gender and sexuality are not inextricable from, not irrelevant to, representation of nationalism" (429). Primarily considering the relationship between nation, nationalism and homosexuality, Puri's framework enables to think how nation is sexualized and sexuality is nationalized. It is to critique both imagining nation as heteronormative, reproductive entity and imagining sexuality under the notion of nation.

The King and the Clown participates in this "imagining a nation" by projecting contemporary (South) Korean nation-state and the "national" audience to share the same history of Joseon dynasty, King Yeon-san and the clowns. By framing the characters' interpersonal queer relationship under the framework of nation, the film also nationalizes the characters' queerness, while their national "queer" bodies are de-sexualized by not presenting sexual encounters between the characters. In other words, the film *nationalizes* the characters' queer desires by imagining it as asexual *Korean* queerness.

The film's imagination of de-sexualized and nationalized queerness is specifically discussed in the interviews of the film director Lee Jun-ik. In particular, Lee nationalizes the characters' relationship by positioning the "West" as the Other of Korea regarding "homosexuality." In other words, Lee defines "homosexual" subjectivity as a national idea by contrasting the "Wester homosexuality" with the "Korean relationships" in the film. In an interview with *Chosun Ilbo*, he says, "the act of an elder sleeping with a young boy, is that homosexual (호모섹슈얼)? That is a behavior based on the theory of yin and yang to absorb *qi*. [It's] different from the Western homosexuality that [a subject] indulges in a same-sex [subject]. The three [characters] are related to each other based on sympathy" (Jun-ik Lee by Park).[16] Lee in the interview seems to differentiate the idea of same-sex sexual performances as a cultural ceremony from the notion of "homosexuality" based on identity. However, he actually argues that same-sex performance that is framed in an "Asian" context ("the theory of yin and yang") is different from the "Wester same-sex sexual indulgence." Lee provides his binary worldview as "the East vs. the West" by positioning the Korea nation within the culture of "the East." By

[16] "노인이 어린 소년과 침소를 같이하는 행위, 그게 호모섹슈얼인가. 그건 "기" 를 흡수하려는 '음양론'에 입각한 행위다. 동성을 탐닉하는 서양의 동성애와는 다르다. 셋은 연민으로 물고 물리는 관계다."

contrasting the "Asian same-sex phenomenon" with the "Western same-sex sexual indulgence," he conceptually de-sexualizes the same-sex "sexual" behavior in Asia (and Korea) that is represented with "the act of an elder sleeping with a young boy…to absorb *qi.*" At the same time, the rhetorical question at the end "…is that homosexual?" confirms Lee's denial of "homosexuality" in Korea. Consequently, Korea (or more broadly, Asia in this quote) becomes a nation (or a region) where same-sex "sexual" behavior is de-sexualized, and "homosexuality" is denied.

Lee's argument complicates itself in a Hangyeorae newspaper interview. Asking not to see the film with the "Western perspective," Lee says, "[h]omosexuality is not the core of expression, but [the film] is the reality that has existed in the culture of our history[17]" (Jun-ik Lee by Kim). His comment seems to be ambivalent because he does not specifically define what he means by "expression" and "the reality." It can be understood as an attempt to argue against the globalization of "gay" identity, and affirm the existence of Korean national history of queerness. If he means to say that homosexuality "is not the core" of *the film expression*, Lee normalizes queerness under the frame of Korean national history. By calling the characters' queerness "the reality," he possibly means to argue that queer sexuality in the Korean history was not marked as deviant or non-normative as in "homosexuality" in the West.

If Lee means to say "[h]omosexuality is not the core of expression" in *Korean historical intimacy*, however, Lee disavows queerness of the characters' intimacy. Then "the [Korean] reality" becomes everything opposite to what he defines "the West." In other words, "the reality" signifies a denial and de-sexualization of queerness in the nationalized space Korea, which contrasts with the existence and sexualized homosexuality in "the West." By calling the

17 "동성애가 표현의 본질이 아니라, 우리 역사속 문화에 있었던 실재다. 서양의 관점으로 보지 말아달라."

characters' de-sexualized relationship "the reality" of Korea, and by conceptualizing "homosexuality" as a property of the national Other (the West), Lee disavows queerness in the film. Considering how Lee emphasizes that the film is not a "homosexual film" in many other interviews, I argue that his comment should be understood as a disavowal and denial of queerness in the nationalized space of Korea by de-sexualizing the "Korean-ness."

Lee's approach to the idea of "homosexuality" in the interviews demonstrates that he conceptualizes the "queerness" of the characters as a national entity. Despite his disavowal of "homosexuality," Lee frames this "reality" as a *Korean* one. Although it does not exhibit any intention to restore and celebrate national history of Korean homosexuality, the film provokes Korean nationalism to the local audience through the historical figures (the King, royal family, and the dynasty itself) and traditional arts (tightrope, puppets, and traditional musical instruments). The nationalism the film evokes is well exhibited in the director's intention as well. In the same interview with *Hangyeore* newspaper, Lee emphasizes the national tradition as the reason for the film's success as he says; "[Korean traditional culture]…created a shared bond [of the audience]," "It seems that there was a hidden desire to find something from our traditional culture [in the audience]," and "…I thank our ancestors. Without them, the film would have not existed." By disavowing the film's queerness, Lee contributes to the heteronormative and homophobic imagination of a Korean nation and the nationalism.

Nonetheless, Lee's perception of homosexuality still leaves questions about the restored queerness in this analysis unanswered. If the desires and affection between same-sex male characters are not "homosexuality," what are they? Is calling their queerness "reality" an acceptance of queerness as universal love, or an erasure of "Korean homosexuality?" Are same-sex desires and affections with sexual indulgence punishable in the Korean nation? These

questions result from Lee's dichotomous imagination of "Korea as a nation of asexual platonic love vs. the West as a place of sexual indulgence." This approach erases sexuality of Korean queerness and emotional bonds based on love and affection of the Western queer subjects. Stepping out of the binary, one's love and care is not distinguishable from sexual desire and indulgence, regardless of their sexual performances or identity.

This chapter has discussed that the film *The King and the Clown* nationalizes queerness by de-sexualizing it, and the asexuality of the characters in the film has served the rhetoric of disavowal of same-sex desire and homoeroticism in Korea. This nationalistic approach to queerness in films, however, is not unique to *The King and the Clown. Hello My Love,* which I analyze in the next chapter, also nationalizes queerness that the film presents. At the same time, however, the film frames this nationalization of queerness in a significantly different way from that of *The King and the Clown*. Depicting the contemporary South Korean nation in a global setting, *Hello My Love* provides another public imagination of nationalized queerness.

Chapter 2

South Korea, France and Queer: *Hello My Love*

After the success of *The King and the Clown*, several feature films provided various portrayal of queerness. In 2006, *Like a Virgin* attained much public attention as well as popularity for depicting a "boy" in a small town, who wants to be a woman, joining the traditional wrestling team to win money for a sex-change surgery. *Frozen Flower* was released in 2008, gaining a huge attention from the public thanks to the cast of superstar celebrities. Participating in the similar discourse with *The King and the Clown* of imagining Korean national historical queerness, the film deals with King Gong-min of Go-ryeo dynasty, who had attractive young men as his guards and had sexual relationships. Despite much attention from the mass media, the film did not receive favorable reception from the public. In the same year, the film *Antique* was released featuring a gay character and queer themes.

Along with these films, *Hello My Love* was released in 2009 as a low budget feature film. Although it did not gain much media attention or create a public discourse as much as the previously mentioned films did, the film was officially invited to the tenth Jeon-ju International Film Festival (JIFF) and received favorable critiques from the viewers and some online news agencies, particularly in regards to its "light" portrayal of queer subjects despite the lack of cinematic coherence of story and its development ("Hello My Love"). Narrating through the voice of a radio-host Ho-jung, the film attempts to portray contemporary Korean gay-identified male subjectivities. The setting of the film contrasts with *The King and the Clown*, which provides a historical setting for queerness. In this section, I intend to analyze this film to provide a comparative perspective with national imagination of queerness in Korea from *The King and*

the Clown. By examining the characters and their symbolic embodiment of "nation," I attempt to find answers to the following questions: How is "South Korean" queerness imagined in this film? How are national and diasporic queer bodies framed? How does the film frame the im/possibility of the transnational queer relationships? Eventually, I argue that the film imagines queerness through a dichotomous set-up between a nationalized space of South Korea and an imagined place of France.

Queer Diaspora

In comparison with *The King and the Clown*, the noticeable feature of *Hello My Love* is the contemporary global setting of South Korean queer subjectivity. In the film, queerness within the national boundary of South Korea is positioned with the aid of an imagined space France. Paris is where Won-jae meets Dong-hwa, and Jin-yeong meets her partner. Dong-hwa leaves for France when his relationship with Won-jae does not work out. Dong-hwa's new partner is a French man when Jin-yeong marries her French partner and will live with her in France. *Hello My Love* defines South Korean queer subjectivities with the queer-identified character's relationships with France. In situating how the film imagines national and international queerness, and investigating how this subjectivity relates to the location of France, I find the concept of "Queer Diaspora" useful.

As Martin J. Ponce summarizes in his queer readings of Anglophone Filipino writer José Garcia Villa, queer diaspora studies emphasizes both "queering the diaspora" and "diasporizing the queers" (579). In other words, queer diaspora provides a framework to question the heteronormative and reproductive approaches to the concepts of nation and diaspora on the one hand, while it challenges the Euro- and/or Euro-American centric approaches in investigating queerness on the other (Gopinath 10-13). While queer diasporic reading enables critiques of the

two dominant ideas simultaneously, Ponce reminds us of the warning, which this framework has provided against the dichotomous framing of the globe: "celebrating the West (the neocolonial global north) as the site of sexual tolerance and liberty while condemning the "rest" (the formerly or still-colonized global south) as the site of prejudice and repression..." (579). Ponce here cautions the dichotomous imagination of the West as the progressive space for queer relationships and the "rest" as the oppressive space of queer-phobia, respectively. Furthermore, he discusses how the temporal dichotomy of "postnationalist modernity" and "nationalist tradition" is weaved into this imagined spatial binary of the "progressive West" and the "oppressive rest."

Framing *Hello My Love* with this cautionary note by queer diaspora, this section analyzes how the film's portrayal of local and diasporic South Korean queer subjects falls into the dichotomous mapping of queerness. In other words, it examines how the film imagines that South Korean queerness and queer relationships are limited under the national space of South Korea (the "rest," "nationalist tradition," and "Third World") while the subjects may be able to find the possibility of queerness in the national Other space of France (the West, "postnationalist modernity" and "First World").

Imagining Queer South Korea and Queer France

The film's construction on dichotomous worldview of South Korea vs. France in relation to queerness is shown throughout the film. It frames Paris as an imagined space where the South Korean queer subject Won-jae can exert his identity and relationship as a gay man, while the national space of South Korea is framed as a confusing place for him. Won-jae meets Dong-hwa in Paris during his study abroad of two years, and he realizes his sexuality through him. In a

conversation with Ho-jung, Dong-hwa confesses how he realized his sexuality to Ho-jung's question:

> 호정: 원재야, 그게 언제부터였니?
> 원재: 파리에서 동화 만나고서 그때 진짜 날 알게 됐어. 근데 한국에 다시 오니까 혼란스럽다, 모든게 다…
>
> Ho-jung: Won-jae, since when was it?
> Won-Jae: I got to know real myself as I met Dong-hwa in Paris. But now that I am back in Korea, it's confusing, everything is…

Won-jae narrates that he realized his sexuality through meeting Dong-hwa in Paris, and then confesses that everything confuses him because he is back in South Korea with his boyfriend while Ho-jung is still his girlfriend. Using Ho-jung as an unfinished relationship and his family as a traditional bind, the film situates the South Korean space as an uncomfortable but unavoidable reality for Won-jae. On the other hand, the space of Paris and France is imagined as an ideal space with his freedom to be with his "true" lover Dong-hwa.

The confusing South Korean space becomes a violent and homophobic space as Won-jae's relationship with Dong-hwa is revealed in public. After hearing the relationship between Won-jae and Dong-hwa, drunk Ho-jung's boss Mun-ki publicly announces Won-jae and Dong-hwa's relationship and makes homophobic comments on them at the opening party of the wine restaurant.

> 문기: (모두에게)…이곳 사장인 두 남자는 호모랍니다. 남자끼리 섹스하는…
> 동화: 그만 하시죠.
> 문기: 놔, 이 호모새끼야…
>
> 동화, 문기를 친다. [중략]

문기: 두 사람 서로 사랑하는 사이지? 둘이 뽀뽀도 하고 그러냐?

동화, 문기를 다시 친다. [후략]

Mun-ki: (To everyone)…it is said that the two men running this place are homos. Those who have sex with men…
Dong-hwa: Why don't you stop?
Mun-ki: Let go, you faggot[18]…

Dong-hwa hits Mun-ki. […]

Mun-Ki: You two love each other, right? Do you kiss each other and stuff?

Dong-hwa hits Mun-ki again.

Characterized with the degrading term "homo" (호모) to the gay-identified people and the homophobic attitude, Mun-ki represents a heteronormaive queer-phobia of oppressive South Korea. The manifestation of heteronormative space continues even after the chaotic incident at the opening party. Devastated to hear the news, Won-jae's mother cries and begs to Ho-jung for help to "save" him. Characterized as a "traditional" woman, Won-jae's mother hires a shaman to exorcise him from the "demon."

무당: ... 유씨대주가 앞길이 막혀서 막막하지만, 이 정성 받들어 내가 원 풀어주마! 걱정하지 마라!

Shaman: … The future of the Yu family linage is blocked so it seems dark, but I will realize your wish considering your sincerity! Don't worry!

[18] I translated 호모새끼 as *faggot* to deliver the demeaning connotation. It is a combined word with 호모 (homo) and 새끼, which is a degrading term to indicate a person with a closer meaning to a "son of a bitch." The subtitle of the film translates this term as "Goddam gays."

The shaman narrates that the linage of the Yu family is blocked because of the demons in the family. While the stereotypical portrayal of Korean shamanism implies the "superstitious" and "primitive" undertone to the local audience, the shaman's narration emphasizes the heteronormative and reproductive aspect of a family and nation building ("…family linage"). In other words, the space of South Korea is represented with the aspect of "pre-modern" and the supposed heteronormative violence of the tradition. Although this kind of religious practice is highly unlikely to happen in contemporary South Korean settings, the film reinforces the image of "repressive and pre-modern" national space of South Korea where queerness and tradition cannot coexist.

These two scenes of heteronormaive and patriarchal oppression are imagined to be a national phenomenon as the scene of exorcism overlaps with the montage of Dong-hwa leaving the country at the airport. As the incidents of homophobia are framed to be the limits of the national space, South Korea becomes the national body of intolerance and ignorance for South Korean queer subjects. Instead of portraying the two queer characters with agency to solve the imminent reality, the film shows them as helpless victims of national homophobic violence and familial duties. The only alternative to them is to either conform or leave; Won-jae marries Ho-jung and Dong-hwa leaves South Korea. Without having a chance, the two South Korean queer subjects passively fail to unite in the space of South Korea where only homophobia and oppression exist.

The shaman is exorcising Won-jae

While South Korea is imagined as a national homophobic space, France becomes the Other of South Korea, which defines what South Korea is not. When South Korean "backwardness" of a queer relationship is represented with homophobic slurs and the "lower culture" shamanistic exorcism, the invisible (the film never shows a scene in France) and imagined space of France becomes the shelter for Dong-hwa from the South Korean homophobia and oppression. This ideal space is a place where the two South Korean queer subjects Won-jae and Dong-hwa used to be able to unite. It now makes a relationship between a South Korean queer subject Dong-hwa and a white French queer subject Marti possible as the film shows the interracial couple later. As this interracial possibility of queer relationship contrasts with Won-jae's failure of marriage with Ho-jung, the film reinforces the contrast between the "oppressive" space of South Korea and the "modern" space of France. The film suggests the necessity of a

white French body for a South Korean queer subject to succeed in forming a same-sex union; a pair of two queer bodies is only possible through a white racial subject for a South Korean queer.

This dichotomous global mapping and the possibility of a South Korean queer relationship only with a white queer body are reinforced by a supporting lesbian character Jin-yeong's marriage with her French partner and her future plan of married life in France. On the last day of her radio show, she comes out as "lesbian" in her special goodbye for the listeners.

> 진영: 그리고 제가 사랑하는 프랑스 사람은, 여성입니다. [중략] 우린 파리에서 처음 만났습니다. 첫눈에 서로를 알아봤죠. 행복했었습니다. 근데 전 혼자 돌아올 수 밖에 없었습니다. 자신이 없었죠. 동성애자로 산다는게… 제가 누군지 얘기하는 것이 왜 그렇게 힘들었을까요. 절 부정하며 사는 것이 과연 행복일까요. 전 비로소 자신이 섰습니다. 사랑하는 사람과 함께 있어서 행복해질 자신이 생겼습니다. [후략]
>
> Jin-yeong: And the French person who I love, is a woman. […] We met in Paris for the first time. We noticed each other at our first sight. I was happy. But I had to come back alone. I didn't have the courage. To live as a homosexual… Why was it so difficult to talk about who I am. Is that really happiness to live denying myself. At last I have the courage now. I have the courage to be happy for being with a person who I love. […]

In Jin-yeong's narration of coming out, her love and relationship with her partner was possible in Paris, but she had to decide to come back to South Korea without her. As she comes back alone to South Korea, the South Korean space again becomes a place where a South Korean queer subject cannot exert their identity. Jin-yeong could not accept her sexuality and live as lesbian in the space of South Korea ("자신이 없었죠. 동성애자로 산다는게…, I didn't have the courage. To live as a homosexual…"). However, when she is finally ready to accept her sexuality and live with happiness, she leaves the place of intolerance and moves to the imagined land of acceptance.

Her story contrasts with the situation of Won-jae, who is listening to the show in a car with Ho-jung. Won-jae goes to their wine restaurant and cries over his memories of Dong-hwa. Another union of South Korean queer figure (Jin-yeong) and a French queer subject becomes possible in France while Won-jae's South Korean queerness is framed as a failure.

These four specific scenes more directly demonstrate how *Hello My Love* frames queerness with the notion of nation, and unlike *The King and the Clown*, the film specifically positions the South Korean nation as the opposite of the imagined nation of France. As the evidence proves, the South Korean nation is imagined as oppressive and homophobic, pre-modern "Third World" for queer subjects while the invisible space of France is framed as a modern and progressive "First World."

Impossibility

In addition to the nationalization of queer bodies in *Hello My Love* for the South Korean queer characters under the dichotomous global mapping, Jin-yeong's subjectivity necessitates looking at the aspect of gender in examining how the film imagines queerness. Even though Jin-yeong is presented in the film as a queer body, her agency as a lesbian only manifests at the end of the film. Her existence in the film as a female queer remains in the limited domain of helping to define the male queer relationships. Gayatri Gopinath terms the very framework of queer diasporic women bodies' invisibility and unimaginability under the national and international imagination as *impossibility.* Gopinath uses this framework to investigate queer diasporic South Asian public cultures with "the notion of 'impossibility' as a way of signaling the *unthinkability* of a queer female subject position within various mappings of nation and diaspora" (my emphasis, 15). In other words, she specifically focuses on how South Asian queerness is not only

invisible but also "unthinkable" in the discourse of the "dominant diasporic and nationalist ideologies" (16).

Jin-yeong's queerness resonates with the "impossibility" of South Korean queer diasporic women on one hand, and the dichotomous mapping of "modern" France and "traditional" South Korea on the other. As we have seen, Jin-yeong's queerness and relationship are framed to be with a French subject in the French national space while South Korea is a space where she cannot be who she is ("제가 누군지 얘기하는 것이 왜 그렇게 힘들었을까요, Why was it so difficult to talk about who I am."). This national binary of acceptance vs. oppression seems to become the binary of impossibility vs. possibility through Jin-yeong's subjectivity as a South Korean queer woman. The space of South Korea with homophobia, familial values, and tradition becomes the space of impossibility for national queer female subjects as Jin-yeong leaves the nation for the ideal space of queer possibility, France.

However, the notion of possibility of Jin-yeong's female queerness in France is a false notion because both South Korea and France are impossible spaces for queer women subjectivities and relationships. The lack of visual portrayal of Jin-yeong's queerness confirms the invisibility and unimaginability of a South Korean queer woman. Her desire for another woman, her partner and her relationship are not shown in the film at all. The most explicit queer gesture for Jin-yeong is to verbally come out as "lesbian." Her queer desire and relationship are literally not imaginable in this film. Her agency as a queer woman appears only at the end of the film, as a supporting tool to contrast the failure of South Korean male queerness. This invisibility of the queer female subjects contrasts with the visibility, and even possibility, of the pair of interracial and binational queer male pair in the film: Dong-hwa and Marti. South Korean queer

women's desire, queerness and relationships are unimaginable and impossible in *Hello My Love*'s imagination of queerness.

As the Eurocentric framing of global queerness is not revoked at the end of the film, *Hello My Love* concludes with its understanding of contemporary South Korean queerness as "backwardness" in its dichotomous mapping. The last scene of the film shows the three characters' reunion at a beach where they once had fun together. Under the pretentious rainbow, the two South Korean queer subjects, who failed to unite as a couple, and Ho-jung, who also failed to unite with her love, playfully laugh with each other. The loose conclusion suggests the unguaranteed happiness and future of the failed South Korean queer subjects. By ending without any solution, the film confirms its projection of South Korean queerness and queer space as failure and impossibility.

Showing the two South Korean queer male subjects (Won-jae and Dong-hwa) and their struggle with a heteronormative society, *Hello My Love* carries a "positive" intention of promoting anti-homophobic (both from society and family) messages to the audience. However, as the film imagines South Korean queerness and queer space through nationalized and gendered queer subjects, *Hello My Love* creates the dichotomous mapping of "South Korea vs. France" as "pre-modern vs. modern," "tradition vs. modernity," regressive vs. progressive," "Third world vs. First World" and "the 'rest' vs. the West."

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have examined the two South Korean feature films *The King and the Clown* and *Hello My Love*, and discussed how these two films define and imagine queerness through the framework of "nation." *The King and the Clown* provokes the nationalized queerness by showing the characters' queer desires in a historical setting with historically actual figures (King Yeon-san and Gong-gil, although the plot is a fiction) and traditional arts. By framing their relationships through the shared history of "the Korean nation," queerness between them is understood as *Korean* queerness. The lack of sexual intimacy between the queer subjects helps the public to nationalize the characters' relationships because the absence of sexuality does not interrupt the heteronormative and reproductive imagination of the South Korean nation. This nationalization of Korean queerness is, ironically, supported by the director Lee Jun-ik's nationalistic disavowal of the characters' queerness with the reason of their de-sexualized subjectivity. Lee positions the characters' relationships as "Korean reality," which he conceptually contrasts with the "Western homosexuality." By defining the "Western homosexuality" as the Other, Lee nationalizes the characters' "reality" (read "queerness") as a Korean one.

Set in contemporary South Korea, *Hello My Love* also frames queerness with the notion of nation by juxtaposing the South Korean national space with that of France. However, instead of de-sexualizing or disavowing the characters' queerness, the film's comparison between South Korea and France creates clear dichotomous perspectives on these two nations. By depicting South Korean space as homophobic and oppressive, and by *imagining* (not portraying) France as a utopian space for queer bodies, the film subscribes to the Eurocentric understanding of global

queerness. In other words, the film blindly celebrates the Western form of queerness by portraying South Korean queer space as "pre-modern," "oppressive," and "ignorant" while the invisible French space is imagined as "modern," "progressive" and "accepting."

By imagining queerness through nationalization, these two films suggest no future or possibility of queerness in South Korea. *The King and the Clown* actually suggests a possible history of queerness in the Korean peninsula, but the possibility gets erased as the public and the film director deny and reject this possibility. *Hello My Love* may attempt to warn the South Korean public regarding homophobia, but this film condemns Korean tradition and culture as sources of ignorance and "un-civilized" attitude. By not providing any alternatives to the characters, the film also fails to acknowledge a possibility of queerness in South Korea.

The absence of possibility for queer subjects in these two films implies that the attitude of the general population in South Korea towards homosexuality and/or queerness is ambivalent. Romance between close friends without sexuality can be "tolerated," but it cannot be called as homosexuality or queerness. If the queer subject is pretty and Westernized (modernized), their existence can be "tolerated," but their same-sex love and relationship cannot take place in the land of South Korea. Pointing out that this partial inclusion of a non-normative group into the mainstream society resonates with other discourses of power relations among diverse social groups, the project has demonstrated that the South Korean public still remains to be ambivalent between superficial tolerance of queer bodies through a media representation and unresolved homophobia within the public and institutions from the lack of explicit discussions about queerness.

The ambivalent attitude towards queerness in South Korea leads to a false imagination that the country "progresses" to a more modernized and developed status in the globe. Instead of

engaging with the local queer subjects and participating in global discussions about queerness, heteronormative film directors, public viewers and institutional professionals ignore the reality of queerness in South Korea and imagine it for a nationalistic agenda of "modernization" and incorporation into the "First World" global status. The superficial "advancement" of diverse sexuality without critical conversations about queernesse possibly disguises public homophobia with the mask of development.

The two films and other South Korean queer films indeed started public conversations regarding queerness, queer subjects and queer performances. Within a decade, the nation has slowly changed to be more open about non-normative sexual and gender identities and performances. However, this change necessitates more than a simple obligatory movement for the national economic and political standing in the world. Through engaging conversations about queerness in films and profound debates about cultural discourses generated after their releases, South Korean public may find a better starting point to pursue more egalitarian society.

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